

FRONTIERS OR INTERACTION ZONES?

BORDERLANDS AS AREAS OF COMMUNICATION AND MOBILITY

Workshop by Mirco Brunner, Julia Menne <http://fiz2019.net/>
28.02.-02.03.2019, Institute of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bern

Pottery beyond Cultures – A praxeological Approach to Mobility, Entanglements and Transformations in Prehistoric Societies.

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Life in the 21st century seems to be particularly shaped by mobility, from daily commuter movements to poverty-, war- or climate-induced migration. But what role has spatial mobility played in the prehistoric past? Surprisingly, we still do know rather little about it. This is particularly true for the European Neolithic societies. Questionable premises like concepts of social and cultural coherence of residence groups and the ethnic interpretation of archaeological cultures fostered ideas of static and homogeneous social entities with fixed borders. Beyond that farming – understood as the core of the Neolithic way of life - was rather associated with sedentariness than with mobility.

Yet the numerous outstandingly preserved Neolithic UNESCO World Heritage wetland sites of the Northern Alpine Foreland dating to 4th millennium BC are a solid research basis to address such questions. In particular, many of the dendrochronologically dated settlements on Lake Zurich and Lake Constance of the period between 3950 and 3800 BCE offer a rare opportunity to investigate cultural, social and economic processes with a high temporal and spatial resolution. In this paper we will use them as a case study to inquire the role of spatial mobility, for cultural entanglements and transformations in prehistoric societies.

Taking three recent paradigmatic shifts as a theoretical starting point – the mobility, practice and material turn –, we have developed a mixed-methodology to investigate spatial mobility using ceramics. While qualitative methods (impressionistic classification of vessel designs) allow us to understand social practices of pottery production from the actors' perspective (micro level), quantitative methods (computational autoclassification of vessels shapes) make it possible to explore structural patterns of pottery consumption practice across several settlements (macro perspective). Through the combination of both perspectives, far-reaching entanglements between regions become visible, as well as mobility-related local appropriations and transformations of pottery practices in the rhythm of decades. In this way, the usual culture historic models of homogenous societies can be deconstructed and replaced by entanglements between different communities of practice.

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